

# American ARTIST

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**EDWARD BETTS** began studying painting seriously when he was fifteen, attending summer sessions at the Art Students League in New York. After graduation from Yale in 1942, he spent four years in the Army, then returned to the League for another period of study. Since 1949 he has been an instructor in the Art Department at the University of Illinois in Champaign. His work is in several museum collections and can be seen at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York City.

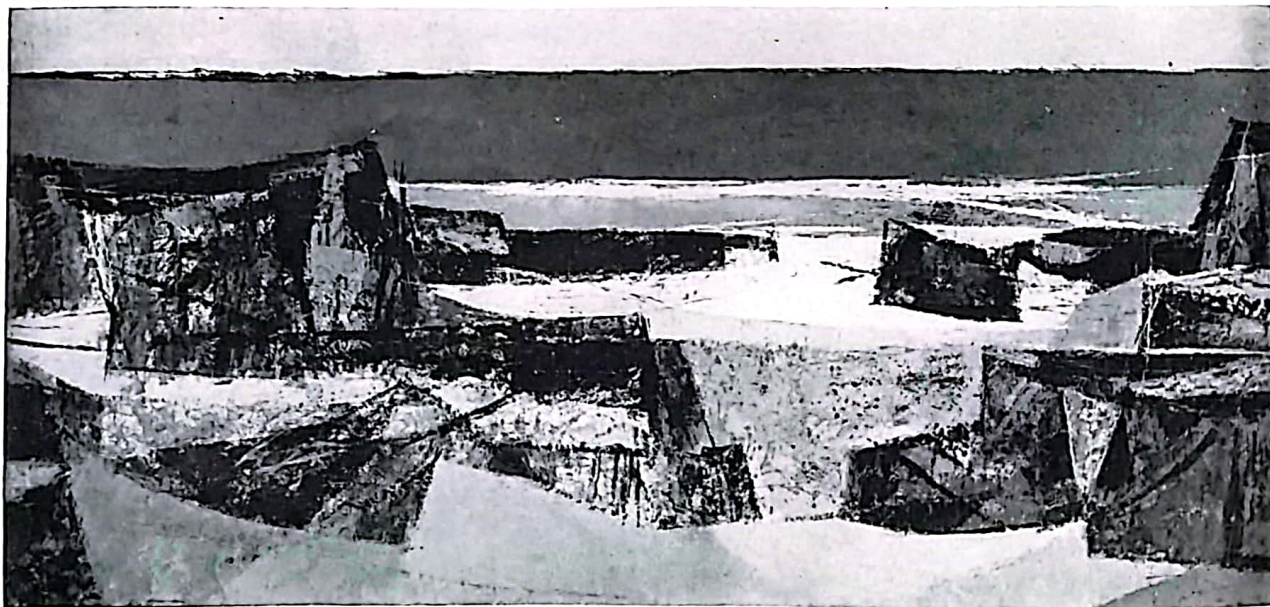
# Edward Betts

## discusses his Lacquer Paintings

I no longer paint in oils. About six years ago I abandoned oils in favor of casein, and in 1950, looking for a major medium that combined the richness and permanence of oils with the fast-drying properties of casein, I began to experiment with artists' lacquers. Today the major part of my output is in this medium. I paint quite rapidly, so it is particularly important that I employ a quick-drying medium that permits repeated overpainting during the course of five or six hours. Lacquer dries swiftly and allows almost immediate overpainting, scumbling and glazing. My painting supports for lacquer are usually masonite panels. For small pictures I sometimes use mounted watercolor boards, mat boards or paper, framing them as gouaches under glass.

I very seldom begin with a preconceived composition, and I never precede a painting with drawings or studies. Preliminary studies tend to decrease my interest in the actual process of painting and somehow inhibit any chances of allowing the picture to grow and evolve of its own accord. I painted directly from nature for over ten years but all my current work is created in the studio and is the outgrowth of memory and experience rather than on-the-spot sketches or photographs.

I have a workbook in which I keep a long list of possible



*"Rocks at Low Tide" lacquer 19 x 40*





*"Black Fish" casein 30 x 22*

picture titles which are not necessarily intended to be given to any specific painting, but rather to furnish me with the initial impetus for a day's work. There are such titles as "Black Against the Sea," "Within the Rock," "Strata of the Shore," "Drowned Coast." These evoke a mood and get the act of painting under way even though the completed picture may turn out to be quite different in subject and mood.

Since there is no specific image in mind at the start, I simply begin to paint more or less intuitively, gradually establishing abstract color areas and movements out of which the landscape in its final form may emerge. This underlying formal order which furnishes the structure of the picture also provides a rich underpainting in color and texture which is used to enrich the surface quality of the completed work. In the first stages, then, the panel is—almost literally—attacked with paint; but, once the form of the picture begins to assert itself, the approach is more meditative and complex.

Most of my work is done with the palette knife though occasionally I use bristle brushes as well. I sometimes enjoy the thrill of harnessing accidents by manipulating the results on the canvas with brushes, painting knives, rags or whatever is handy.

I have two definite techniques for applying color. The first, and the one I use most, is to handle the color loosely in large semiblenched areas dictated by feeling and movement of pattern.

The second method uses the lacquer in tight geometrical forms and is much more analytical as to design qualities than the first. Both starting techniques are totally abstract in concept with absolutely no attempt at this point toward realistic thinking.

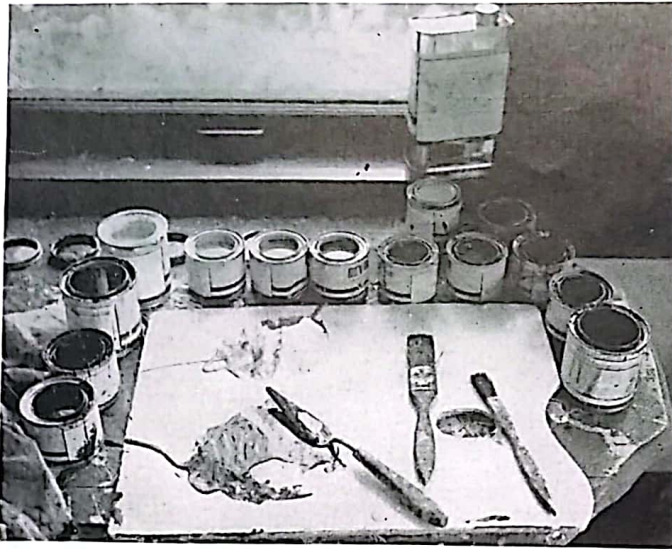
The first stage of filling the complete painting surface is usually done on from four to eight canvases at one sitting. At no time have I ever worked a single painting from start to finish before starting a second, third or a fourth. When I paint, I like to feel that I am working with colors and ideas rather than just making a picture. At the end of this period I have started a group of paintings, but I have finished none. I then leave the paintings, letting some



*Collection Butler Institute of American Art*

*Storm Tide" lacquer 28 x 40*

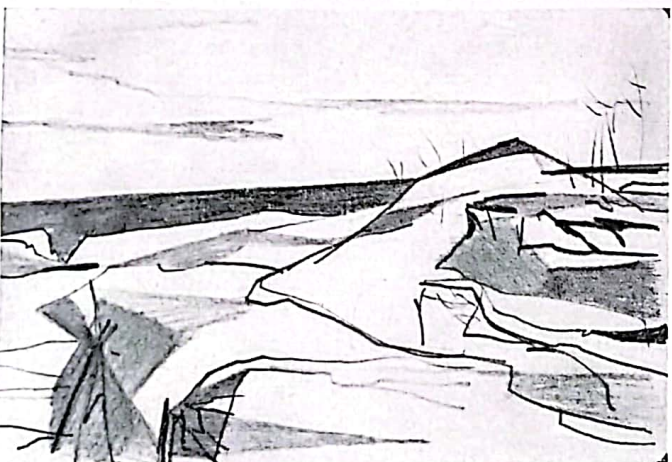




*Betts' palette is of the peel-off disposable variety. The containers of lacquer are arranged around its edge. The palette knife is the tool he uses most in painting but brushes are also needed.*



*Betts always works with the panel lying flat on a drawing board or table. Often the colors are transferred directly from the containers to the painting support, then mixed and blended thereon.*



*While Betts never does preliminary sketches for particular paintings, he has filled many sketchbooks with drawings and graphic notes such as these. The rocks and pines, surf and sky of the Maine coast near Ogunquit are recurrent motifs in his paintings.*

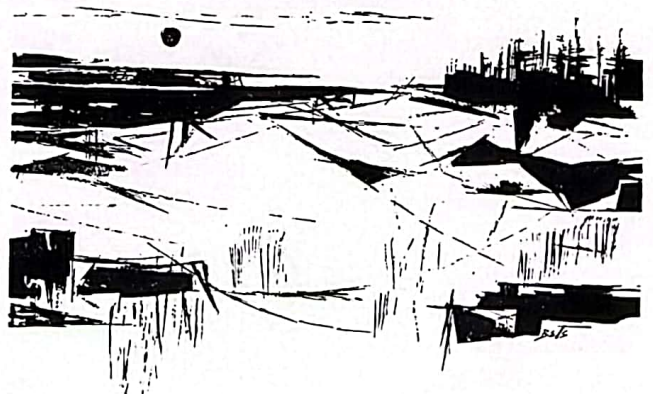
*Photography by Leonard Zamiska*

time elapse before they are touched again. After a healthy painting session I feel myself in a very satisfied state of happy exhilaration.

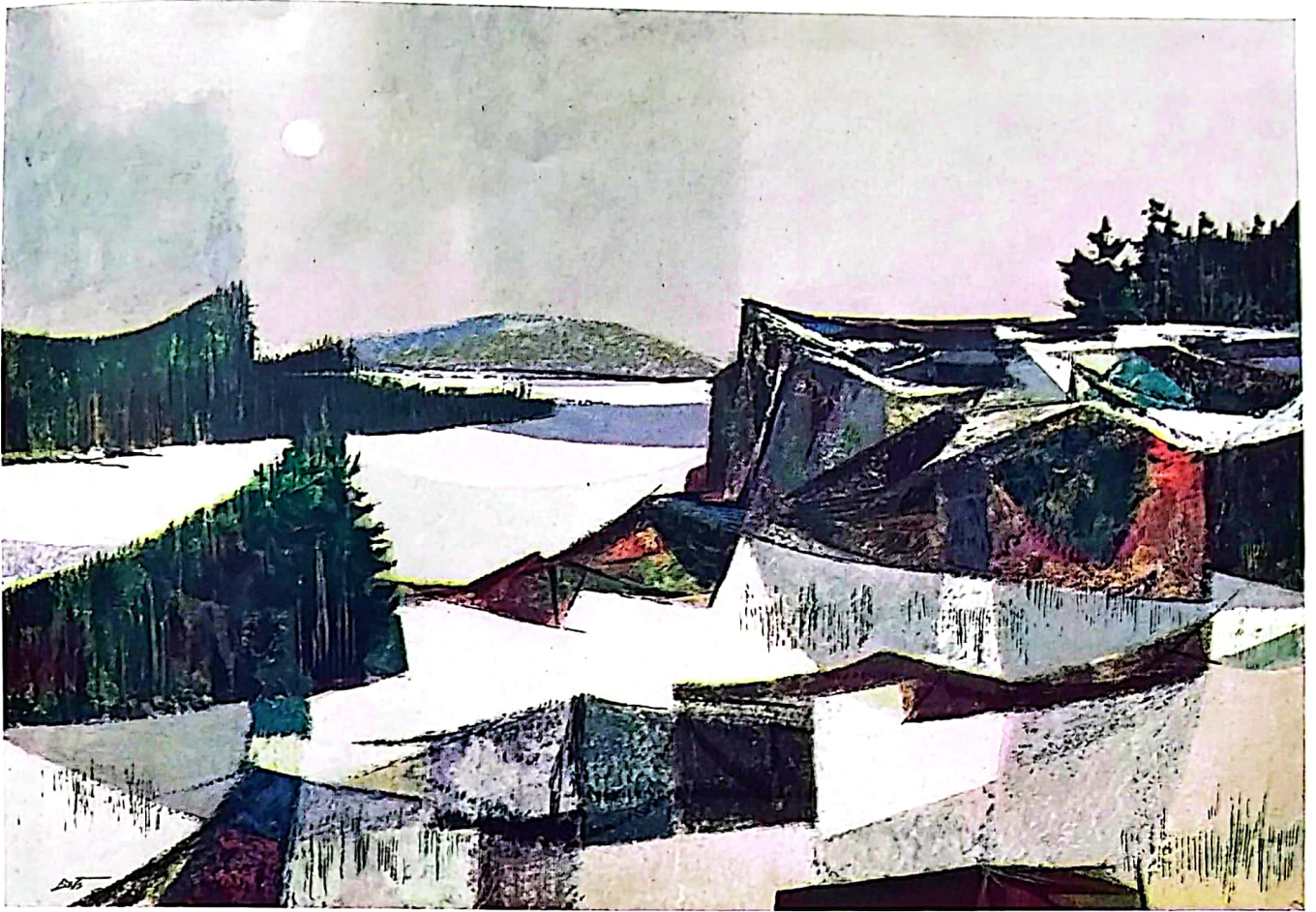
The next step is not one of manipulation but of contemplation. I sit with each painting for a period of time looking at it, turning it and trying to find some affinity between the painted surface and myself. If no emotional contact is made, I leave it for another time. If, however, it clicks, then the canvas is put on an easel and step three takes place.

In this step, a retarder is sometimes used to slow the drying process. The lacquer is now applied in thin transparent masses suggestive of the theme but with no painted linear delineation. While wet, sponges, rags, etching needles, knives and scratchboard tools are used to remove the paint in developing the theme. In other words, painting is a process of application and removal followed perhaps by further application and possibly further removal. Usually two or three paintings are again left to dry and again a period of waiting takes place. This lapse of time serves two purposes: The first, a technical one, is to allow for thorough drying and hardening. The second, a highly personal reason, is to prove to myself the validity of my first conceived impression. The final stage of the painting is calligraphic delineation. The lines may be heavy and straight, or soft, thin and flowing, dictated by the feeling about the subject or the pattern. The amount of time spent on a picture may vary from a single morning to more than three weeks depending on how often I have to build, destroy and rebuild various areas.

In June 1947, quite by chance, I went to Ogunquit, Maine, for the summer and have returned there to paint every summer since. It was with those first paintings of the Maine coast that my work began to jell. I responded to the forms and textures of the coastal region and fully indulged my love of the sea in all its aspects. Rocks and pines and surf and sky became recurrent motifs that still fascinate me. In Maine I filled a stack of sketchbooks with material and took hundreds of photographs, working not only in the vicinity of Ogunquit, *(continued on page 59)*





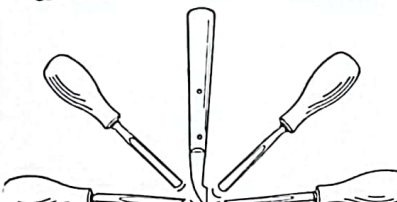


FROZEN LANDSCAPE LACQUER 28 x 40 BY EDWARD BETTS  
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**EDITORIAL (from page 58)**

munity and of continuity, so needed in this chaotic land where the general motto of writers might be 'out of nowhere into nothing.' What did C. Day Lewis mean when he said, 'The present is nothing unless it is spun from a live thread out of the past'—and insofar as we fail to remember our own great men of former days, so far the greatest of our time will also be forgotten. For the actual possibility of durable fame depends on the memory of those who have deserved it. We must cultivate this memory, we must transcend the raw youth that is always beginning again on new frontiers, that is all foreground without any background and resents the mere thought of the background that affords us a further dimension of collective depth."

Van Wyck Brooks

\* \* \*

These impressions are particularly appropriate in this issue of **AMERICAN ARTIST** in which we have focused the spotlight upon a great American painter who, at present, is a favorite target for "the hard little eye of detraction." Sargent, in our opinion, will remain a great name in the annals of American art and we are happy to do even the slight homage afforded by our pages to point up his genius as a watercolorist.

E. W. IV.

**EDWARD BETTS (from page 42)**

but also on Monhegan Island, sixteen miles out at sea off Port Clyde. Although my visits to Monhegan were fairly brief, its rugged cliffs, dark pines and pounding surf have made a lasting impression on virtually all my work.

My summer studio in Ogunquit is on a high hill overlooking the harbor, Perkins Cove and the open sea, so that, as I paint, the sea and the harbor activities are constantly within view. Even in winter, when I am teaching at the University of Illinois, I retain some of the flavor of the seacoast in my studio in Champaign with pieces of driftwood, weathered lobster buoys, shells, rope and so on.

Most of my compositions are horizontal rather than vertical because I so often paint a long stretch of beach with bands of sky, sea and shore. My purpose primarily is to seek out the structure and inner order that already exists in nature, rather than to impose an arbitrary design on my subject matter. I have already accepted the fact that I am not an experimenter trying to formulate a new tradition. I am far more deeply concerned with a personal response to nature's shapes, textures and patterns, and with creating a pictorial expression of that experience, the eventual aim being a truly meaningful integration of abstract structure with visual reality. It is the struggle to achieve that integration which is the driving force behind all my painting and thinking.

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